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Dickens in the Eye of the Beholder: The Photographs of Robert Hindry Mason

Leon Litvack

This illustrated essay treats the complex web of relations between Charles Dickens and the London photographer Robert Hindry Mason (1824–85), who executed a fascinating series of portraits of the author and his circle in the early and mid-1860s. These depict Dickens in a wide range of poses, modes of dress, and locations; they vary from the formal and professional, to the seemingly informal and familial. Taken together, they constitute the most diverse group of Dickensian images captured by a single photographic operator. A close reading of sixteen selected images offers insight into the various guises in which Dickens—aided by his photographer—wished himself to be seen by his public, and memorialized for posterity. Through information gleaned from newspaper advertisements, exhibition reviews in the periodical press, law reports, criminal records, bankruptcy records, post office directories, references in the specialist photographic press, comments written on the back of individual prints, and brief references in Dickensian correspondence, Mason’s personality and working practices are usefully disclosed. This piece opens up an avenue of Dickens studies which has not been heretofore extensively explored; it also offers detailed consideration of how the professional and artistic elements of nineteenth-century photography contributed to the forging of Dickens’s public reputation.

Dickens’s most fruitful period coincided with the development of one of the most significant technological innovations of the modern age, and one which continues

to fascinate and to exercise powerful influences over us all. Photography allowed visual images to become cheap, pervasive, and plentiful, and provided a means of instant recognition of places and people. In Dickens's case this was highly significant: over two hundred images of the novelist circulated in his lifetime, including paintings, engravings, lithographs, and photographs. These enhanced his popularity, and contributed to a ready identification with one of the most famous figures of the day.

In her seminal study *On Photography*, Susan Sontag considers the pervasive influence of this powerful medium:

In teaching us a new visual code, photographs alter and enlarge our notions of what is worth looking at and what we have a right to observe. They are a grammar and, even more importantly, an ethics of seeing. Finally, the most grandiose result of the photographic enterprise is to give us the sense that we can hold the whole world in our heads—as an anthology of images.

(3)

These observations are highly significant in terms of the ways in which scholars and admirers visualize Dickens: viewers who are familiar with photographs of the author quickly gain the impression that they know him, and can recognize his unique features; they can, in Sontag's words, "hold" him in their "heads." Yet there is a certain vagueness about how photographs of the famous writer are viewed or treated. We are largely ignorant of the circumstances under which the photographs were taken, or when the images were produced; also, we know almost nothing about who the photographers were. A good example of such naïveté may be found in Claire Tomalin's recent biography. Under a photograph of an older Dickens sitting at his desk, Tomalin includes this caption: "The old lion, grizzled, ravaged, fierce, not giving up. He disliked being photographed but he put up with it, sitting at his desk, quill pen in hand—inimitable as ever" (Tomalin, facing 385). While it is clear that Tomalin's captions are wry supplements to her analysis of Dickens's character, the factual information about the photograph, given at the front of the book, is rather unhelpful: "Dickens at his desk, 1865 or later, photograph by Mason" (xiii). In this description so much about the photograph remains hidden: precise details of its maker, his relationship with the novelist, the date on which the photograph was taken, details of the pose, and even whether it is factually correct to describe the desk as Dickens's own.

A great deal more is known about today's photographers and their motivations. The iconic American fashion and portrait photographer Richard Avedon (1923–2004) was intensely aware of the relationships—however brief—he developed with his subjects, who included President Kennedy and his family, Marilyn Monroe, Andy Warhol, John Kerry, John Glenn, Pablo Picasso, Samuel Beckett, and the Beatles (see Holm). In a catalogue for an exhibition in Minneapolis in 1970 he wrote:

I often feel that people come to me to be photographed as they would go to a doctor or a fortune teller—to find out how they are. So they're dependent on me. I have to engage them. Otherwise there's nothing to photograph. The concentration has to come from me and involve them. Sometimes the force of it grows so strong that sounds in the studio go unheard. Time stops. We share a brief, intense intimacy. But it's unearned. It has no past . . . no future. And when the sitting is over—when the picture is done—there's nothing left except the photograph . . . the photograph and a kind of embarrassment. They leave . . . and I don't know them. I've hardly heard what they've said. If I meet them a week later in a room somewhere, I expect they won't recognize me. Because I don't feel I was really there. At least the part of me that was is now in the photograph. And the photographs have a reality for me that the people don't. It's through the photographs that I know them.

(Avedon no page)

These seminal observations, which have been widely quoted by scholars, are particularly applicable to those who photographed Dickens—even to those for whom he sat on a number of occasions. These professional operators did not feature largely in Dickens's life, and are rarely—and then only briefly—mentioned in biographies (see Slater, *Charles Dickens* 471). Yet their productions and personalities are essential to our understanding of both the public and private Dickens. It is also important to recall that photographers inevitably leave, as Avedon intimates above, something of themselves in their images. It could be something material, like a prop, or a background on a studio wall; it could also be a pose, or even something more ethereal, like an exchange of words which contributes to the formation of a subject's facial expression. In his analysis of Avedon and his subjects, Goodyear points out that a photographic portrait "has the potential to reshape our understanding of its subject" (234). The existing photographic portraits of Dickens embody similar potential, and are the product of a heretofore unexplored exchange between artist and subject.

Dickens's image was captured by a number of prominent photographers in the course of his career: Antoine François Jean Claudet (1797–1867; see Schneider); John Jabez Edwin Mayall (1813–1901; see Reynolds & Gill, and Xavier); (George) Herbert Watkins (1828–1916) and his brother John Watkins (1823–74; for both, see Prescott); Alphonse Maze (see "Chronique du mois" and Kitton 36–37); Benjamin Gurney (1812–86; see Peyrouton); and Adolphe Naudin (see Litvack). Another series was executed at regular intervals in the early and mid-1860s by the London photographer and photographic publisher Robert Hindry Mason (1824–85). These depict the novelist in a wide range of poses, modes of dress, and locations; they vary from the formal and professional, to the seemingly informal and familial. Taken together, they constitute the most diverse group of Dickensian images captured by a single photographic operator. A close reading of a selection of them offers fascinating insight into the various guises in which

Dickens—aided by his photographer—wished himself to be seen by his public, and memorialized for posterity.

Robert Hindry Mason was born in Great Yarmouth, where his father (also called Robert) was a professor of dancing. Little is known of his early life; however, there is a record of his spending twelve months in prison in 1841–42, for the offense of “Larceny by Servant”—a crime of stealing, while in a position of trust, from one’s employer (*County of Norfolk* 349). In the 1850s he became a newspaper publisher: he founded the *Greenwich and West Kent Observer* in 1853, and owned the *Sunderland Times*, *Sheffield Advertiser*, and the *London & Eton Gazette* (Mackie 2: 360). In 1858 he established a publishing firm at 7 Amen Corner, 36 Paternoster Row, in the City of London. By the early 1860s the nature of his business began to change. Kelly’s *Post Office London Directory* for 1863 identifies the firm as “publishers” (Kelly 1863, 129); in 1864 the designation is altered to “photographic publishers” (Kelly 1864, 161; see also “Mason, Robert Hindry”).

In October 1864 Mason took over the premises of John Damerell Symons at 28 Old Bond Street, and traded there as a photographer (see Kelly 1865, 571) until October 1872. He extended his enterprises to other parts of the country: he kept a foothold near his birthplace, by establishing a photographic business in Norwich, and also set up another establishment in Cheltenham. His advertisements boasted his expertise in “Every branch of photography,” with “Family pictures and works of art copied, and enlarged or reduced to any size” (“First-Class Photographic Portraits”). Mason rose to fame through publishing several series of high-profile photographs, including the *Church of England Photographic Portrait Gallery* (1858–61, in 66 parts; John Watkins provided the images, and Mason compiled the brief biographical sketches); a series of portraits of eminent lawyers called *The Bench and the Bar* (1859–60; photographs by John Watkins); a monthly series called *The British Photographic Portrait Gallery* (1860–61); and a colossal image, measuring twelve feet by seven feet, of the worldwide Pan-Anglican Synod at Lambeth Palace in 1868 (see “A Monster Photographic Group”). Mason’s images were largely produced using the collodion process, which was invented in 1850, and involved spreading a viscous, light-sensitive liquid onto a glass plate; when this was transferred to a camera and exposed to light for a few seconds, an image was captured. The wet plate was then developed, and the image fixed. When a paper negative was placed against the glass and exposed, a photograph was produced. It was an inexpensive process, and was capable of producing multiple prints of consistent quality, on paper coated with an emulsion of egg albumen and salt, which was then dipped in silver nitrate to render it photosensitive; such photographs are often referred to as “albumen prints” (see Gernsheim and Gernsheim, *The History of Photography* 197–206).

Mason’s particular talent lay in advertising and distributing photographs (often taken by others) to a consuming public anxious to purchase popular images. For example, in 1859 he partnered with the photographer Arthur James Melhuish to

accept commissions from the public for specially produced images of country houses ("Photographic Views of Country Mansions"); Melhuish also provided the photographs for Mason's *Cathedrals and Churches of England* (1859). Mason also obtained exclusive permission to photograph prominent individuals; for instance, he issued cartes-de-visite of King George I of Greece, who visited London in 1863 (see "The King of Greece"). In 1862 he obtained sole rights to publish a full-length photograph of the recently deceased Prince Albert, and cashed in on its exclusivity as "the last time his Royal Highness sat for a portrait," which was "specially selected by himself for publication" ("The Late Prince Consort"). This particular photograph was the subject of a legal battle between Mason and the photographer Robert Vernon Heath, concerning the price to be paid to Heath for the negative. Mason (the plaintiff) maintained that he had agreed to pay Heath five guineas for each of the two negatives; Heath, he said, had demanded fifteen for each, and so was in breach of contract. An idea of the profits to be gained from owning the rights to such an important image may be gained from Mason's statement that he intended to produce 40,000 copies of the photograph, and could have made a profit of 6*d.* on each one ("Court of Common Pleas, Feb. 28"; see also "Mason v. Heath," "A Dispute About a Negative" and "Action in Relation to Negatives of the Late Prince Consort"). Mason's total profit would have been £1,000 (which, according to the "Measuring Worth" web resource, would be £76,600 today). The judgment granted Mason one of the negatives, for a payment of five guineas. The impression of Mason which emerges from this case is that of a shrewd businessman, who dealt firmly (but fairly) with others in the photographic trade, and who knew the value of his product and how to market it successfully.

Available evidence demonstrates that Mason had at least three photographic sessions with Dickens, though it is unclear who made the initial approach. The first encounter for which a record exists took place on 5 September 1863, at Gad's Hill; the novelist wrote to the photographer two days previously to inform him that "Higham is the station. I will send a little Basket Phaeton to meet you there, at 11:20 on Saturday morning" (*Letters* 10: 284). The second recorded sitting was on 6 August 1866; Dickens wrote to Mason on 3 August to confirm that "Monday will suit me perfectly. . . I will expect you at Gad's Hill on that day" (*Letters* 11: 230). The third documented meeting occurred on 14 November 1866; Dickens wrote to his sub-editor W. H. Wills the previous day, to say that "Tomorrow (Wednesday)" he was scheduled to "sit to Mason in Bond Street (for some tattoo'd staring monster to be displayed in the Paris Exhibition) at 12" (*Letters* 11: 272). Even given such evidence, it is difficult to know if these three sittings were the only ones which Dickens granted to Mason. It is also challenging to determine which of the surviving photographs were captured at a particular time during this three-year period. Dickens was in his fifties: his facial features and physique did not change perceptibly between 1863 and 1866; also, it is difficult to chart any alterations in the color of his hair and beard, or indeed hair loss,

in these monochrome images. It is, however, possible to group the photographs based on other identifying features, such as backgrounds, buildings, furniture, and other details of setting; the presence of other individuals; modes of dress; and the photographer's stamp (which may be relevant because Mason moved from Amen Corner to Bond Street in October 1864). Through the use of such details, a fascinating album of Mason photographs can be constructed, organized, and analyzed.

The letter from Dickens to Mason of 5 September 1863, quoted above, is from an early point in the relationship between photographic operator and sitter. It is a formal invitation to Gad's Hill; the statement "Higham is the station" (*Letters* 10: 284) confirms that Mason had not previously visited Dickens's country home. In the letter of 3 August 1866, Dickens simply writes "I will expect you at Gad's Hill on that day" (*Letters* 11: 230), thus implying that Mason knew the way to the house. These visits represented opportunities to depict Dickens in a novel fashion, away from the confines of the studio, which generally limited the possibilities for artistic depiction. Such restrictions are considered in an article (of unknown authorship) entitled "The Carte de Visite," published on 26 April 1862 in *All the Year Round*; it features an interesting description of a visit to a studio, in which the photographic subject is overwhelmed by his surroundings:

[The sitter] feels at once dazzled and oppressed by that glare of light above his head. It makes him blink, it closes up his eyes, it gives him a sense of having been up all night. The properties about the room, too, are bewildering. There are all sorts of things appropriate to all the different professions which different sitters may be expected to follow. There is a piece of complicated wheel-work for a mechanician, a pair of globes for a geographer, a nautical compass for the mariner, and a pair of compasses for a civil engineer. There, too, is a palette and an easel for the artist, a book for the divine, an empty brief for the lawyer, an hour-glass for the philosopher, and an inkstand and a pen with a tremendous feather in it for the author. Lastly, there is a wretched painted scene which is intended to take the public in as a landscape-background, but the honest instrument will never fall into the scheme, and hating the landscape always proclaims it for the sham which it is. This background is intended for private and non-professional persons, and there is also a pillar and a curtain—but who are those for? What is the profession of that unhappy and misguided wretch who is supposed to pass his life in a perpetual environment of pillar and curtain?

("The Carte de Visite" 167)

The vogue for associating an individual with his or her profession—or with non-descript pillars and curtains—was a phenomenon to which Dickens was often party (or victim), in the studio images captured by his previous photographers, Claudet, Mayall, and the Watkins brothers. The photographs taken by Mason at Gad's Hill, however, represented a fresh departure.

Gad's Hill was a home where Dickens felt at ease; it was the place where he could be a delightful, charming host, consummate family man, and most at peace with himself (see *M. Dickens* 7–45); it was, according to Slater, the “goal of his earthly pilgrimage” (*Dickens and Women* 174). By allowing a photographer to access his country retreat, Dickens was revealing certain aspects of the self to which his adoring public was not heretofore privy. The Gad's Hill images constituted a splendid, animated series of photographs of Dickens and members of his family and friends in various poses, often looking relaxed and comfortable in their setting. These prints, which also included images of various rooms in the house (*Letters* 11: 461), were not private snapshots: they were public images, intended for consumption by Dickens's admirers, and they show the novelist in a completely different light from all previous efforts. They add considerably to our understanding of Dickens in his domestic sphere and may be read as an instance of his breaking with convention and reinventing himself for his public in novel fashion.

Mason captured an image of Dickens under the portico of the house (fig. 1). It resembles a *tableau vivant*, in which the author is joined by his daughters Mamie and Katey, the music critic Henry Chorley, Katey's husband Charles Collins, and Georgina Hogarth. Dickens, dressed in a light colored suit, leans against one of the pillars, and looks towards the viewer, as if to confirm that this is his abode, his family, his friends, and that he has achieved all this through his own labors. The group is bordered by the large variegated holly bushes growing on either side of the front steps. These serve to confirm that this is a living scene, not meant to be static or uncomfortable; yet the subjects are carefully posed, to provide different areas of interest in a complex image. Dickens holds a wine glass in his hand, as if to confirm the scene's conviviality; but no one else joins with him in a drink. He looks at the camera, as does Mamie. Katey looks absently into the middle distance, and seems detached from her sister; her hands are awkwardly extended, as if she is engaged in a conversation with someone beyond the camera. The three seated figures do not engage effectively with one another. Chorley (on the left) was a devoted friend of Dickens in the Gad's Hill years (see *Letters* 9: 205, 272; Forster 685; Hewlett 2: 228; Bledsoe 224–26), but was considered eccentric by all who knew him, on account of his brightly colored clothing, high-pitched voice, and caustic observations (Hewlett 1: 70–1; 2: 231, 238; Bledsoe 222–3, 302); here he places his right hand on his left breast beneath his jacket, and he may be looking on as Charles Collins reads the dark-covered book in his hands; Georgina, meanwhile, holds a folded newspaper in her lap, and gazes off to the left of the image, not paying attention to anyone else. Dickens is clearly the focus: he is the tallest of the group, and the wine glass draws the attention of the eye; its presence suggests that Dickens is not always the serious professional writer, but can also be the jovial host, who enjoys a drink in the company of family and friends.

Another image taken in the front garden at Gad's Hill depicts Dickens with his two daughters (fig. 2); it is one of three such images, with similar poses, taken

by Mason on the same day. Dickens is imagined as reading to Katey (standing behind Dickens) and Mamie (seated beside him); Frederick Kitton believes the book to be a volume of Carlyle's *French Revolution*, which the author reread several times as he composed *A Tale of Two Cities* (Kitton 82, though no substantiation is offered for this claim; see below for further discussion). Mamie sits at on a low chair or stool beside her father, looking not at the book, but backwards, as if something in the laurel bush has caught her eye. Katey stands behind, with her hand on her father's shoulder, looking at the open page. Dickens meanwhile sits astride the chair, which is of a wirework variety, widely available in the 1860s from various manufacturers (see Lear 10–11). It serves as a convenient bookrest, but also renders him slightly vulnerable in terms of his pose; Kitton acknowledges that this posture is an "unconventional attitude" (Kitton 82). Like the previous image at the porch, this one is carefully posed; it is an attempt to convey the nature of the relationship between father and daughters. The presence of so much vegetation—the laurel bush on the left, and the potted geraniums (the author's favorite flowers) on the right—gives the impression that the bond between the three is natural and organic. There is also a harmony between the outfits the three wear: all are of lighter colors, which help the figures (which are in sharp focus) to stand out from the darker background. There is, perhaps, a suggestion of tenderness, of a kind which could never be conveyed between Dickens and his sons (see, for example, *Letters* 7: 245): the three are in close proximity, and indeed touch one another lightly. Nevertheless, there is also paternal authority: Dickens, in the dual role of author and father, is directing his children towards the insight provided by the volume he holds.

Another exterior shot (Fig. 3) also depicts Dickens reading—this time in the back garden of Gad's Hill. He is sitting on a bench, and is brightly lit, in order to help his light-colored figure stand out from the darker foliage behind him. He is gazing into a book, thus confirming his association with the printed medium. In this particular case it is possible to confirm, using external evidence, both the title of the book, and the date on which the photograph was taken. Kitton's speculation above in relation to figure 2 (that the volume is Carlyle's *French Revolution*) may be placed in doubt by a specimen of figure 3 in the Dickens Museum: Thomas Carlyle's own copy of this carte de visite, which was given to the Dickens Museum in 1932 by the Comte Alain de Suzannet (Slater, *Catalogue*, 143). In this image Dickens is holding a book, with a cover that appears to be darker than the volume he clutches in figure 2. While Kitton provides no firm evidence for identifying the volume in figure 2 as *The French Revolution*, Carlyle himself provides more credible proof for figure 3. On the back of the image Dickens's friend wrote: "Charles Dickens, at the back of his House, Gadshill, reading 'a Vol of French Revolut[io]n,' '6 or 7 Augt 1866' (see *Letters* 1 & 2 of the Phot[ographe]r Mason—who sent it 18 june 1870; a thing really touching & tragical to me,—& to be kept *private* withal) T. Carlyle." He added, as an afterthought: "Dickens's *Burial Day* was June 14th, was it not? *Today* is 'June 23'.—T.C." Carlyle's remarks are significant in

many ways—not the least of which is in dating the photograph precisely: 6 August 1866 was certainly one of the occasions on which Mason was at Gad's Hill (*Letters* 11: 230). Given what Dickens was wearing in figure 3, as well as the setting and atmospheric conditions in the image, it might also be possible to fix this date as the occasion for figure 2, and perhaps figures 1, 4, and 5.

The comments are also fascinating because they provide insight into Carlyle's own feelings about Dickens's death. Existing correspondence confirms their close friendship. In a letter to Carlyle (to whom *Hard Times* is dedicated) concerning the composition of *A Tale of Two Cities*, Dickens wrote, "I cannot tell you how much I thank you for your friendly trouble, or how specially interesting and valuable any help is to me that comes from you" (*Letters* 9: 41); he signed another letter "Your affectionate CHARLES DICKENS" (*Letters* 9: 145). Forster recalls the loftiest praise which Dickens extended to Carlyle: "I would go at all times farther to see Carlyle than any man alive" (Forster 839). Carlyle was equally warm in his approach to Dickens, and wrote thus to his friend, who was wintering in Paris in 1855: "Adieu, dear Dickens; come soon back to us, and let me see you then" (*Collected Letters* 109). Thus, the image which Carlyle received from Mason carried substantial meaning, and prompted strong feelings—"touching," and even "tragic"—on the part of Carlyle, who wished to keep his thoughts on the matter to himself.

No correspondence survives between Mason and Carlyle, and there was no known professional relationship between them; it is therefore impossible to determine precisely why the photographer sent Carlyle a copy of this image of Dickens. It was probably at Carlyle's request: he may well have wished to have an image of Dickens reading his *French Revolution*, a work the novelist called that "wonderful book," and which he claimed, in 1851, to have read five hundred times (*Letters* 6: 452); indeed Dickens told Carlyle in 1854 "no man knows your books better than I" (*Letters* 7: 367). Dickens may well have intimated to Carlyle that it was this particular book he held in the photograph; thus the requested image carried deep personal meaning for Carlyle, given that his friend had recently died. The identification of the volume also contributes to an analysis of the photograph: Dickens does not glance casually into a nondescript volume; this particular one served as evidence of like-mindedness between the two men. Dickens confirmed this concurrence in his letter to Carlyle about the dedication of *Hard Times*: "I know it contains nothing in which you do not think with me" (*Letters* 7: 367). Thus, Dickens's gaze may be interpreted as one of pleasure, and even intimacy: Mason captures the moment when Dickens revisits an old, familiar friend.

Figure 3 offers insight into the author's relationship with his house. He is dwarfed by the size of the building of which he is owner, and the emphasis is more on the house than on the human subject, on account of their very different proportions. Both are in sharp focus, in order to substantiate the relationship between the building and Dickens: this is the house that his father showed to him when he was a child, and which he dreamed of owning (see Slater, *Charles Dickens*

8, 17). Now, in his early fifties, he has achieved that aspiration. The way Dickens is posed conforms to some of the conventions of contemporary portraiture suggested in the photographic press: an inclined head for “characteristic” artistic “expression,” roundness of the upper body to convey an image of “comfortable ease,” and a natural positioning of the feet, so as to “ensure rest and security” (Dornbach 233).

There are two other exterior photographs taken at Gad’s Hill which require close examination. The first (fig. 4) is a fascinating shot of Dickens in a double-seated basket phaeton, with Mamie in the front seat on his left, and Georgina (R) and Katey (L) in the back. The horse pulling the carriage is named Newman Noggs, and its bridle is held by James Marsh, Dickens’s groom (*Letters* 12: 30). There also seems to be a curled-up dog behind the front right wheel, near the kennel (see *Letters* 10: ii); this may be Linda, Dickens’s St. Bernard, or one of the “three or four small dogs in the [na]ture of canine parasites and toadies” whom Dickens mentioned in a letter of 1865 (*Letters* 11: 119). Dickens had owned a phaeton since the 1840s (*Letters* 3: 256), and he mentions this particular vehicle in his letter to Mason, on the occasion of his first visit to Gad’s Hill (*Letters* 10: 284).

The subjects are clearly posed to bring out the most desirable features of each individual. Once again, Dickens is the tallest figure in the photo, thus emphasizing his importance. He holds the reins lightly but firmly in his lap; there is a clear, authoritative line of communication between his hands and the horse’s bridle (a desirable factor in equestrian etiquette). Newman Noggs is tall and muscular, but restrained and obedient to his master’s will. The groom Marsh is needed only to prevent the horse’s head from moving (which would spoil the photo), and to confirm his employer’s status. Marsh is smartly dressed in a coat, top hat, and boots—all appropriate to his rank and function. All five people look at the camera, united in purpose, which may be to communicate something important about prosperity, and also leisure: Dickens (according to the caption written by the Pilgrim editors to accompany their reproduction of this image) is “preparing to drive the basket phaeton with the three ladies of Gad’s Hill accompanying him” (*Letters* 10: ii). Here he could feel most at home, removed from the pressures of London and of business; according to this photo at least, at Gad’s Hill he could engage in leisure activities, and could be himself, in comfort and in style.

There is another fascinating Gad’s Hill photograph by Mason, which differs in character and content from those discussed above: the image of nine servants, depicted as enjoying tea on the front lawn (fig. 5). They are arranged in the space between the windows of Dickens’s study (on the right), and the portico of the house, bordered by a narrow window (on the left). A large variegated holly bush can be seen on the left, and, on the right, below the window, the potted geraniums. James Marsh (with teacup and saucer in hand), is clearly recognizable in the back row; but the identities of the other eight cannot be confirmed with certainty. The man seated in front of the table (seemingly a figure of some seniority) could be John Thompson (1821–71), Dickens’s man-servant for over twenty years. He is

frequently referred to in correspondence (see, for example, *Letters* 4: 549; 5: 593; 8: 462, 602; 10: 53), and spent a good deal of time in the early 1860s seeing to Dickens's needs in London; "John" (as Dickens calls him) was clearly a trusted employee—at least until November 1866, when he was caught stealing and dismissed (*Letters* 11: 262–63). The man could also be another male servant named George, who was in Dickens's employ at Gad's Hill (*Letters* 9: 153, 594). None of the seven women is easily identified; but among them could be the housemaids Emma Durnford (c. 1833–1907; see Watts 60), Elizabeth Everett (later Ease-down, 1847–1929; see Hughes 370), and "Mary Anne" (*Letters* 9: 236) as well as the parlour-maid Clarissa Hodder, who later married local surveyor Henry Wright (*Letters* 10: 114n2). Others in the group could be the housekeeper Mrs. Sutherland (*Letters* 10: 261), the cook Catherine Earle, who served Catherine Dickens after the author's death (Watts 60), or the servant Ellen Hedderley (1830–86), who went to be housekeeper at 26 Wellington Street in 1867 (*Letters* 11: 320). While it may not be possible to establish with certainty the identities of most of these subjects, it is nevertheless fascinating that Mason thought it profitable to offer for sale to the public an image of Dickens's household staff.

There is another noteworthy photograph which, given available evidence, was probably taken at Gad's Hill: Dickens posed with his bloodhound Turk (fig. 6). In his biography of Dickens, John Forster remarks on the constant presence of dogs at Gad's Hill, and the fact that they were a "great enjoyment" to the novelist; Forster also notes their responsibility for warding off "tramps and wayfarers of a singularly undesirable description". Turk, Forster notes, was Dickens's favorite: "a noble animal, full of affection and intelligence" (Forster 657). Turk also served as partial inspiration for Percy Fitzgerald's piece "The Renowned Dog Caesar" published in *All the Year Round* on 9 May 1863 (see *Letters* 10: 266); there the dog is described as a "splendid creature, so noble, so grand, so massive" (Fitzgerald 256). Forster records that when Turk died unexpectedly in July 1865 it caused Dickens "great grief" (657; see also *Letters* 11: 75). In Dickens's correspondence Turk is only ever spoken of in the context of Gad's Hill (hence the assumption that Mason's photograph was taken at Dickens's country retreat).

In this image (one of two featuring Dickens and the dog) the author rests his hand on Turk's neck, and appears relaxed, clearly enjoying the animal's presence. His gaze is directed at Turk, and they are at ease with one another (this feeling is curiously compounded by Dickens's having his legs open, in a position which might suggest vulnerability). The light coloring of the dog complements Dickens's own light-colored clothing; the two contrast well with the darker background, and with the floor covering, which adds to the texture of the image, and also provides depth of field. It is a successful photograph, in which Dickens adopts the guise of a country gentleman, owner of a substantial property, adept at rural pursuits, and able to control a large animal to do his master's bidding.

Another image which features the dark background and textured floor covering shows Dickens standing, walking stick in hand, looking directly at the camera

(fig. 7). His light colored suit and bowler hat are identical to those worn in the photograph featuring Turk (fig. 6) and the one in the back garden (fig. 3). The pose is confident: he stands erect, turned slightly to the side to emphasize the contours of his physique and the lines of the clothing—particularly the trouser legs and the cut of the jacket; the shadows evident on the insides of the jacket help to give the garment volume and shape. The hat is tilted at a jaunty angle, and does not cast shadows over Dickens's face. The gold watch chain which hangs prominently from his waistcoat is of significant weight, and the sharpness of focus allows the individual links to be discerned. With his left hand in his pocket, and his right hand clasping a walking stick, Dickens gives the impression of ease, style, and celebrity: he is someone who is deliberately posing in an interior space, and he invites the viewer to admire him. There are strong contrasts in this image: Dickens is sculpted by light, and stands out from the background. The image is a good example of how lighting can serve as the "photographer's tool, to be used with judgement and discretion" (Crougton 137) in order to make the subject stand out from his surroundings.

One other image which was taken at the same time as the previous two features Dickens from the waist up, looking directly at the camera (fig. 8). He is wearing the same light-colored suit as in Figures 6 and 7; his hair is the same length, and his beard appears wispy, with streaks of grey. His clutching a book in his right hand is, of course, an allusion to his profession. The emphasis is on adopting an unconstrained attitude—particularly in the upper body, face, and eyes—and thus conforming to some of the standards delineated by the American photographer Marcus Aurelius Root (1808–88), in his seminal work *The Camera and the Pencil* (1864). Root suggested that the photographic operator should concentrate on the eyes, because they "speak all languages" and produce the "appearance of intent". He also observed that the face should "show the *soul* of the original,—that individuality or selfhood, which differences [*sic*] him from all beings, past, present, or future" (Root 113, 116, 143). Root believed that whereas statesmen, lawyers, clergymen, and public speakers should be photographed in standing positions, writers should be posed sitting down, in order to help them recreate a "mental mood" in which their "chief excitations of intellect are experienced." He mentions Dickens by name, and asks rhetorically: "Would you not. . . have. . . Dickens [posed] as when he accompanied the illustrious 'Pickwick' in his desperately adventurous travels; or attended the child-angel, 'Little Nell,' in her weary earth-wanderings toward that *not* untimely grave, which unclosed the portal of her proper home in the highest heaven?" (Root 165, 166). For Root the key to capturing a successful likeness lay in the photographer's possessing "original genius," by which he meant the "power of acting potently on other minds, not exclusively by thought and word, but also by a noiseless influence which, for lack of a better term, we may entitle magnetism" (Root 166–67). There is an intensity in Dickens's look which demonstrates that there is undoubtedly a connection between photographer and subject; this may be termed rapport, affinity, empathy, fellowship, or even

magnetism. Whatever term is adopted, there is clear evidence in this photograph that Mason could evoke a reaction from Dickens which, when captured by the camera, could convey life, thought, feeling, and individuality.

Marcus Root's observations on posing a writer "while wielding a pen at his desk" (Root 165) are relevant to four images, in which Dickens is depicted with either his own desk, or chair, or both. Such photographs suggest a desire on the part of photographer and subject to introduce an element of verisimilitude into the image. In the first of these (fig. 9) Dickens stands in front of his "whatnot desk," with turned legs, a leather top, and an ornate brass gallery extending round the edge. This piece of furniture features in the 1844 inventory for Devonshire Terrace, drawn up before Dickens went to Italy (*Letters* 4: 705; see also Parker, Richmond, and Rudisil 35). It is significant that he wished to be photographed with his possessions round him, as an extension of his private space and persona. He had done something similar on a previous occasion: his own table and chair from Tavistock House were brought to Herbert Watkins's photographic studio in January 1859, so that they might feature in an image produced for the painter William Powell Frith, to assist him in completing his portrait of Dickens (see *Letters* 9: 9). Here the novelist adopts a confident stance, with arms crossed and feet shoulder-width apart. He is dressed in evening wear, and the light catches in particular the upper portion of his body. His waist-length dinner jacket (with tails) is emphasized, and the bright top light catches the creases at the shoulders and along the arms. His watch chain (prominent in figs. 6 and 7) stands out clearly against the dark waistcoat. The bright satin strip down the side of his trousers emphasizes his height; indeed he looks exceedingly tall when compared with the desk, whose top reaches the middle of his thigh. On the desk lie several leather-bound books (presumably props), whose titles are not visible, though they are in sharp focus; they gesture towards Dickens's station, education, and profession. The presence of the table conforms to contemporary ideas about having a useful "adjunct," intended to provide a "finish to the picture" (Dornbach 233). The chair—the same one as in the Watkins photo for Frith, and in Luke Fildes's engraving *The Empty Chair* (1870)—is brightly lit; the polished wood reflects the light so as to emphasize that this piece of furniture is an essential element of Dickens's professional apparatus.

His facial features are carefully emphasized by the dark background, and by the lighting, which confirm the head as the center of interest (Crougton 137). The quality of light and shadow in this image is extremely important; indeed, it confirms contemporary notions about how "A judicious gradation of lights into shadows and shadows into lights . . . give breadth to a picture" (Crougton 137). The lighting is clearly designed to emphasize Dickens, his chair, and table. The cloth on the floor provides depth, and introduces a softer texture, which contrasts well with the hard edges and surfaces of the furniture. The subject looks directly at the camera, almost as a kind of challenge to the viewer to engage with this impressive individual. Nothing interferes in the relationship between Dickens and his audience: it is he who is in control, and who demands to be admired—a posture

emphasized by the crossed arms, slightly inclined head, and confident look. It is a highly successful portrait, which demonstrates that, with due care and attention to lighting, a photographer like Mason can achieve in his image a success comparable to that achieved by Sir Joshua Reynolds in painting. The comparison between the two arts is made by photographic theorist Alfred Wall in the *British Journal of Photography*:

If we critically examine the portraits of Reynolds we shall find [that] . . . the light falls upon the heads and figures at angles which ensure unity in the chief masses of light and shade. Shadows and their half-tints are grouped together, and the backgrounds serve the same end. We have, consequently, a mellow richness and quiet softness, instead of hard, contrasting edges and isolated spots of light and dark which, especially in photography, result from a contrary style of treatment.

(Wall, "Photographic Portraiture Chapter II" 427)

Two other images from the same session as Figure 9 are worthy of note. As the distance between the camera and the subject is decreased (fig. 10), there is an increasing emphasis on the body of the sitter. In this image Dickens is seated in his own chair and is turned partially to the side in a half profile, so as to emphasize the contours of his upper body. His hands, one clasping the other, rest easily in his lap. The background is so dark as to appear black, thus adhering to Marcus Root's suggestion for short-distance portraits (Root 111); the absence of background color also ensures that the viewer's attention is focussed on the subject. There is delicacy in the chiaroscuro of Dickens's evening wear, with the creases in the jacket adding interesting textures and breaking up the lines. The lapels are smooth, thus lending a neatness to Dickens's shirt front. The satin strip on his trousers extends the horizontal line beyond the frame of the photograph.

Dickens's face is brightly lit, with no obscuring shadows evident. It offers the key to the image, because of the look Dickens adopts: strong, self-assured, and direct. There are interplays of dark and light tints in the hair and beard which focus attention on the face—a feature more fully emphasised in the close-up (fig. 11): here the pose closely resembles that in figure 10, but there are interesting differences. The edges of the image are softened through the use of an oval matte cut-out in the production of the print; the photograph's perimeter is thus obscured, and a light-colored border is produced, in order to emphasize the more sharply focussed center. Also, the distance to the camera is shorter, and there are finer shades evident in the face. The brightly lit forehead contrasts with the delicately shaded cheeks; the relatively fine beard features silver highlights, and the nose is carefully contoured. The artist Marcus Stone recorded his impression of Dickens's features:

He was a lean man, with beautiful limbs and well-developed arms, and an erect carriage made for activity. His face was singularly handsome. He had a nose of almost perfect beauty, with a nostril of exquisite curvature and sensitiveness which is impossible to describe. His eyes also were the most impressive and wonderful eyes I ever saw. They were green-grey in colour—an unusual eye.

(Stone 63–64)

Dickens's eyes clearly made an impression on those who knew him. This Mason photograph emphasizes their penetrating quality, which is accentuated by the curvature of the eyelids, and the photographer's "catch-light"—a small spot of light reflected on the surface of the corneas (Root 114). In an article entitled "Those Wonderful Eyes," Arthur Hearn collates the opinions of Dickens's contemporaries (including Forster, Carlyle, Sala, and others), who characterize his eyes as "flashing," "expressive," "intelligent," "sparkling," and "beaming alike with genius and humour." He concludes: "all agree that they were wonderful eyes" (25–29). The clarity with which one can appreciate the eyes in this image may be interpreted as the accentuation of masculinity. Some scholars of Victorian photography interpret sharp focus as the domain of men, and soft focus as the preserve of women (Edwards 225; Smith 13–51); while such distinctions may be overstated, it is possible to interpret Dickens's pose and facial expression in figure 11 as captivating, intelligent, and confident. It is, perhaps the most arresting photograph by Mason of Dickens.

While Mason photographed Dickens in a greater variety of poses than did his contemporaries, this is not to say that all of his efforts were equally successful. Another image featuring the whatnot desk, but with a different chair (fig. 12) captures a rather unexpected facial expression. Dickens appears somewhat startled: his eyes are wide open, and his intention is unclear. He is not focussed on writing, but rather on the photographer. The half-profile pose, with his left side in particular at an uncomfortable distance from the desk for writing, does not lend itself easily to putting his familiar quill pen to paper. Dickens's right elbow is awkwardly balanced on the brass rail, which would make it difficult to write for any length of time. Thus, while the subject may conform to Marcus Root's suggestion for placing him "in conditions which may remind him strongly of the locality, with its accompaniments, whence thoughts have emanated, which have not alone exalted and thrilled his own soul in solitude, but which may have illumined and warmed the souls of myriads who never saw him" (Root 165), this photograph demonstrates that it is not enough to position Dickens before a writing table, and expect him to adopt a pose which would find favor in the eyes of the consumer. This image takes on the character of a facsimile, rather than a portrait. Alfred Wall, in his contemplation of the lessons that photographers can learn from the painter Thomas Lawrence, quotes from Charles Robert Leslie's *Hand-Book for Young Painters* (1855), in which Leslie observes: "In its present state [photography]

confirms what has always been felt by the best artists and the best critics, that *facsimile* is not that species of resemblance to nature, even in a portrait, that is most agreeable"; Wall then interjects: "—meaning, no doubt, that species of *facsimile* which is true to the form of things but ignores that life and soul which finds expression in subtle changes of muscular action and fleeting lights and shadows" (Wall, "Photographic Portraiture Chapter III" 511). If Wall's logic is applied to this image, it may be considered a facsimile of Dickens writing—or, more simply, Dickens awkwardly posed so as to appear as if he is writing.

Another photograph (fig. 13), probably from the same session as figure 12, is more successfully posed. It too features the whatnot desk, on which Dickens rests his right elbow and forearm. His left arm is bent to match his right, and his closed hand rests at the top of his thigh. The spread of the arms lends breadth to the subject, and the diamond shape formed by Dickens's head, his extended elbows, and crossed legs, provides geometric symmetry. His positioning conforms to what Dornbach terms "harmony" of expression, conceived so that a "proper character" is "expressed and preserved" (Dornbach 233). Dickens's face is in extremely sharp focus, thus delineating every crease, curve and shade in the region of the eyes, which are made more prominent by the contrasting whiteness of his high forehead, cheeks, and nose. The use of a matte over the upper portion of the image eliminates much of the distracting background and focuses attention more clearly on the seated figure. His expression is confident, assured, and direct.

Dickens's right hand stands out in this image, on account of its whiteness when contrasted to its darker surroundings—particularly his jacket and the leg of the table. If the viewer is looking for features which characterize the subject as a writer, the hand is an appendage of particular interest. Here it hangs over the edge of the table, and appears supple, dexterous, and relaxed. Marcus Stone noted of Dickens, "He had fine hands, with that peculiar flexibility which is found very largely among painters and sculptors" (Stone 64). The hand is more comfortably poised than in figure 12; indeed, it relates to a feeling of ease and confidence which pervades the entire image. Dickens is comfortably purposeful, and invites engagement from his audience.

The last three selected photographs of Dickens by Mason were taken in the Bond Street studio, either at the confirmed sitting of 14 November 1866 (*Letters* 11. 272) or later. In a letter to W. H. Wills, Dickens identified the purpose of the sitting as the capturing of an image to be displayed at the Exposition Universelle de Paris in 1867. Photography featured prominently at this world's fair, and Mason was allocated fifteen square feet of wall space, out of a total of 1,967 square feet ("Paris Exhibition, 1867" 87). The specialist press in England provided a full report for readers, and while the exhibits of Julia Margaret Cameron, J. J. E. Mayall, and Antoine Claudet featured prominently, those of Robert Hindry Mason were never mentioned. The *Photographic Journal* noted that the great strength of the English exhibits was in landscapes, rather than in portrait photography; the reason for this judgment was that "our photographers, as a rule,

do not sufficiently study the pose of their sitters” (“Official Reports of the French Exhibition” 122).

The comments in this report may be relevant to the photographs of Dickens from this studio set that feature generic props and backgrounds. One of these (fig. 14) depicts the author standing in front of an ornately carved desk, which has a sloping, movable writing surface placed over the flat top; there is also a raised section at the back, to which drawers are fitted. The pedestals at either end, which support the weight of the desktop, contain drawers (not visible in this image) that open to the sides. The most curious anomaly of this weighty object is that the two legs at the front (that sit on either side of the footwell) are distinctly different: the straight one on the left features a carved ball at the bottom, and a spiral pattern above it, which extends upward to meet the differently designed, highly decorated front; the leg on the right, on the other hand, extends the design of the carved front downward in a curved s-shape, and terminates in a carved foot. The mismatch between the two legs is not apparent at first glance, owing to the increased shadowing on the left leg of the desk, which is very close to Dickens’s trouser leg; but on closer examination the incongruity becomes apparent. Each leg stands on a small platform, and gives the impression that these supports were removable, and interchangeable with others. This adaptability of the large studio prop is confirmed by comparison with other Mason photographs: the same table top, with slanted writing surface, appears in a photograph of Bishop Connop Thirlwall in the collection of the National Portrait Gallery (London), though the carved legs are different from the Dickens image; the table also features in a photograph in the National Portrait Gallery of the Anglican monk Father Ignatius (Joseph Leyceter Lyne), with the same carved legs as the Thirlwall image, and an ornately carved panel inserted into the footwell.

Such adaptability of props was disparaged in the periodical press; Lord Robert Cecil observed in the *Quarterly Review*:

The backgrounds which some photographers employ are a perfect marvel for the elaborate bad taste with which they are arranged. We should be inclined to demur to the ‘properties’ altogether. Sham stiles, ‘practicable’ rocks, precipices in flatted oils, and the ‘multum in parvo solid European accessory,’ which is sixteen articles in one, and becomes a fireplace, Gothic bookcase, pianoforte, or Italian lake, and a dozen other things besides, according as you adjust it—these are wretched tricks for what claims to be, and is, a noble art.

(Cecil 514–15)

Photographers like Mason made use of the materials readily available in their studios to ornament photographs of a variety of subjects, because the market and prevailing photographic styles demanded such accoutrements. Edwards, in his study of Victorian photographic trends, devotes a whole chapter (with the appropriately Dickensian title “gradgrind facts” [*sic*]) to props and façades, and asserts

that “The background had to blend seamlessly with the sitter in order to suggest a coherent pictorial illusion” (Edwards 251). When it did not, as in figure 14, the image became problematic.

This photograph displays other features that diminish the focus on Dickens. The dado rail, with the relief moulding below, adds texture and color to the wall behind the subject; but it also contributes to a background which, while it carries the horizontal line of the desk to the edge of the print, looks altogether too cluttered. The items on the desk are varied, and do not sit well together. Nearest to Dickens there are two books laid on top of one another; these speak to the literary character of the subject. They are adjacent to an upturned top hat (which gives the impression that Dickens has either just arrived, or is about to leave), and a long, thin object laid across the desk, which looks like an umbrella. This jumble of objects gives a cluttered feel to the table top, and obscures the precise role of the sitter. Dickens stands between the table, and a chair—also a studio prop, which appears in a Mason photograph (in the National Portrait Gallery) of the Liberal politician Lord Wodehouse. The author’s vertical positioning contrasts nicely with the horizontal lines of the table and dado rail. His long coat, and the satin stripe on his trousers, enhances the impression of height. Dickens’s clothes are neatly worn; his extended hands, captured in the act of adjusting his cuffs, suggest that he cares about his appearance, as befits a man of his standing. He stands in half profile, and his look is directed out of the frame. While it is clear that Dickens is the main object of interest in the image, the composition is such that the eye of the viewer is distracted by the other elements mentioned above, in the lower half of the photograph. Overall the image lacks authenticity, and the message it wishes to convey about the author is unclear.

A second photograph (fig. 15) featuring the same table and chair as discussed above, is a much more successful, integrated image. Dickens sits at the table, on top of which is placed the sloping board; he has quill pen in hand, poised to write on what appears to be a blank page. There are books on the raised portion at the back, which also supports an inkwell (not visible in this photo, but present in another from this series). He sits forward in the chair, turned in quarter profile, so as to fill the frame more effectively. His face is in sharp focus, and his eyes reflect the photographer’s catch-light, which serves “to impart to the eyes a life-like, bright expression” (Root 114). Of all the Mason images, this is the one in which Dickens not only looks most like a writer, but indeed appears to be caught in the act of writing—even though he (incongruously) wears outdoor clothing. His face speaks of focus and resolution, and his hands are carefully positioned: the left one holds the page steady, while the right is posed with a grip that is purposeful without appearing strained. The seated position allows Mason to use a portrait lens with a shorter focal length; Dickens fills the photograph without crowding it, and the ornately carved table front suggests that a celebrated writer requires a specially decorated desk at which to work—even though the image does not match the reality of Dickens’s creative environment, which was simpler, and perhaps less distracting.

The final image by Mason to be considered (fig. 16) is one that was widely reproduced in Britain after Dickens's death in 1870. It is a close-up profile portrait of the author in the same coat, with the contrasting velvet collar, as he wears in figures 14 and 15. There are fine gradations in light and shading on the nose, cheek, and neck, and particularly around the eye. The creases at the outer corner of his eye indicate maturity without giving the impression of infirmity in advancing years; this judgment is supported by the directness of the gaze, and the reflection of the catch-light on the eye, which adds energy and vigor. His beard, though somewhat wispy at the edges, is nevertheless full and mature, and may be taken as a sign of not only masculinity, but also (if evidence from academic work in psychology is considered) dominance, strength, and self-confidence (see, for example, Pellegrini 29–33, and De Souza et al. 206). The beard has the additional function of masking the author's weak chin, as revealed in a Mayall daguerreotype of 1855 (see Xavier 4–6). Though the top of Dickens's head is rather devoid of hair in the photograph, the hair on the side—and particularly the back—of his head appears fairly dark rather than grey. Thus, he appears somewhat more youthful than in the other images from this sitting.

This image was widely circulated—particularly after Dickens's death, when it appeared as an engraving in the sixth monthly part of *The Mystery of Edwin Drood*, published on 31 August 1870. Its advent was heralded in the press; on 27 August, for example, the *Athenaeum* carried an advertisement by Chapman & Hall, which noted that the novel's final serial part would feature “a Portrait of Mr. Dickens, engraved by Baker, from a Photograph by Mr. Mason” (“Chapman & Hall's List” 260). The artist, John H. Baker (see Engen 21), produced a stipple engraving which altered the coloring of Dickens's clothing: instead of the darker colors of the velvet and cloth coat in Mason's original photograph, Baker substituted a uniformly light-colored garment, which matched more closely the tones used for Dickens's face. The original of this image (at the Victoria & Albert Museum) carries a caption at the bottom, which records that the photograph was taken in 1868—that is, after Dickens's return from the United States, where he sat for Benjamin Gurney in December 1867. If this is in fact the case, then the final year in which Mason photographed Dickens may be extended, from 1866 (see *Letters* 11: 272) to 1868, meaning that this image by Mason could well be the last photograph ever taken of the author.

Mason was clearly aware of the commercial possibilities for this photograph. In addition to licensing the image to Chapman and Hall, he produced a colored version, which, according to the musical review *The Orchestra*, “gives the flesh tones of the original.” The journal compared this Mason photograph to the so-called “nightmare portrait” (*Letters* 8: 9) painted by Ary Scheffer while Dickens was in France in 1855–56:

Those who knew Mr. Dickens will recall that warmth of complexion, that full-blooded look of healthy, hardy manliness. . . . Mr. Dickens's habit of

regular exercise, his keen enjoyment of the open air, his wiry frame, and his manly, genial bearing, gave him what M. Scheffer took for the maritime stamp [see *Letters* 9: 465], and when the story was first told, the author's English friends recognised the analogy warmly. It put into a succinct form of words what most of us had felt without defining, and this it is which the coloured photograph at Messrs. Mason's expresses most clearly.

("Portraits of Dickens" 404)

As these comments make clear, a color image could be more evocative and life-like than anything attempted in black and white. For the 1871 International Exhibition, which opened in London on 1 May, Mason commissioned and exhibited a painting based on one of his photographic portraits of Dickens; while available evidence does not make it possible to identify this particular image, it is clear from comments in the press that viewers were interested in what the portrait could reveal about Dickens's face:

Among the works which have been prepared for the International Exhibition is a life size portrait in oils of the late Charles Dickens from the photographic studio of Mr. Mason, London. It is said to be a good likeness, enlarged from an admirable photograph, and exhibits that more thoughtful aspect of Mr. Dickens's face which has been least often insisted on in his portraits.

("Literary" 429–30; see also "Gems of the International Exhibition" 14)

The different effects which could be produced in paintings and photographs were enunciated by Lord Robert Cecil in his *Quarterly Review* piece:

It is not in the least degree likely that photography will ever dethrone painting from its present pre-eminence. The good painter's resources are so much larger, his power of interpretation much freer, that he will always command more admirers than the best photographer. But it is likely that the admirers of photography will increase in number in proportion as the results of the art become more familiar. . . . It is obvious that the want of colour will always be a great drawback [for photography]. But it has much to offer instead, which, though not a full compensation, deserves to be rated higher than it is by many at the present day. The gradations of light and shade, and the exact form of the objects it depicts, are rendered with a delicacy and a fidelity which the painter cannot even approach. . . . Those who talk of photography as something purely mechanical would be surprised to know how much the attainment of this excellence depends upon natural gift, adroit manipulation, long experience, and careful study of nature. . . . No reasonable person anticipates that the time can ever come when even the most exquisite transparency in monochrome will give us as much pleasure as a first-class painting. But when the power which photography confers of dealing with

light and shade has received the recognition which greater familiarity will procure for it, no one will deny its title to be ranked as a fine art.

(Cecil 505–07)

While the first color photograph had in fact been produced in 1861 by James Clerk Maxwell (see Gernsheim, *A Concise History* 26), the technology was not widely available at the time this article was published; nevertheless Cecil's comments are relevant to Mason's productions in a number of ways. In the case of his black-and-white photographs, it is clear that he paid close attention to chiaroscuro, sharpness of focus, and the careful positioning of his subject in a variety of poses. The decision to render several of the images in color—particularly after Dickens's death—endows these photographs of the author with what Cecil calls "complete familiarity," and leaves the viewer with a more enduring feeling of "pleasure" (506, 507).

In the years after he photographed Dickens, Mason had some major artistic successes—particularly with "The Bishops Attending the Lambeth Conference" (1868), which was not only available as an albumen print, but was also on display as a spectacular colorized photograph in Mason's studio (see "The Lambeth Conference" and "The Bishops Attending the Lambeth Conference"). Given the range of famous personalities who sat for him, Mason may be said to have had a successful career overall; yet even though he produced over fifty thousand prints of photographic portraits a year (Edwards 71), his business career was not without its financial difficulties. In 1857, while trading as a newspaper publisher in Sunderland, he was declared bankrupt (*London Gazette* 30 October 1857, 3637), and ended up paying his creditors dividends of 1s. 2¼d. and 2s. 6d. to the pound (*London Gazette* 29 March 1859: 1353). This misfortune presumably led to his moving to London to open his photographic business in 1858. He went bankrupt again in 1866 (*London Gazette* 21 December 1866: 7082), and dissolved the Norwich branch of his business in 1867, though it took some months to find a buyer (see "First-Class Photographic Business for Sale"). Mason ceased trading in October 1872, owing to a third and final bankruptcy (*London Gazette* 25 October 1872: 5044). He appears to have faded into anonymity thereafter, and died on 7 October 1885, aged 61. He left behind a wife, Mary (b. 1825), and two sons, Ernest (b. 1852) and Horace (b. 1855).

While many of the images treated in this study are well known to Dickens scholars, the circumstances of their manufacture are not. It is difficult to know precisely how many photographs Robert Hindry Mason took of Dickens, his family, and others associated with his household. A survey of the Dickens Museum collection, and that of the National Portrait Gallery in London, reveals forty-two different images which can be attributed to Mason. The majority of these were circulated in the public domain; but Dickens's correspondence demonstrates that he cancelled a number of proofs which Mason had sent him, so there may well have been more photographs taken, which have not been preserved. After the

sitting on 5 September 1863 Dickens wrote to say "I think it would be well to cancel Nos. 790, 807, 810, and 811," and "I like grim 812 and 813 less than 810 and 811" (*Letters* 10: 288, 290). The image numbers have not been preserved, and so there is no way of matching them up with particular likenesses; but it is clear that the author had some say in which photographs were marketed to an eagerly awaiting public.

Dickens's general dislike of photographic images of himself is evident in a letter of 17 October 1863, where he says to Mason, "It is my fate to 'come out' ferocious, and I will bear it, I dare say they will be satisfactory to many people, and they will be satisfactory enough to me if they prove serviceable to you" (*Letters* 10: 303). On 20 November 1866 he tells Mason, "In these last instances, I think the camera has let me off more easily than usual. I will not ask you to cancel any of the photographs you have sent me"; yet a week later he writes again: "I think the enclosed griffin should be cancelled" (*Letters* 11: 274, 278). Despite these comments, Dickens clearly recognized the value of his image to "many people," and thus entered into an agreement with Mason, which made use of this photographer's highly developed skills in art, mechanics, optics, chemistry, business, advertising, distribution, and other fields besides, to achieve what he cherished dearly throughout his career: an intimate connection with his devoted admirers. As he wrote to fellow writer David Moir in 1848: "Go where I will, in out of the way places and odd corners of the country, I always find something of personal affection in people whom I have never seen, mixed up with my public reputation. This is the best part of it, and it makes me very happy" (*Letters* 5: 341). Photographs allowed him to reach out to the widest possible audience, who could then "hold" him in their "heads" in the way Susan Sontag suggests (3).

Edwards notes how Victorian celebrity images, particularly in the form of cartes de visite, "closed the distance between the middle class and their heroes" (83). These images, which measured 3 ½ by 2 ¼ inches, were easily and cheaply available, and collected into albums by enthusiasts, who included Dickens's daughter Mamie (see *Letters* 11: 462), and his wife Catherine ("Lot 218"). In 1862 alone, 105 million cartes de visite were produced; these were sold to the public at a rate of twelve shillings per dozen (Edwards 71). In the same year the journalist Andrew Wynter wrote about this extraordinary phenomenon in a piece entitled "Cartes de Visite," which was published in *Once a Week* (and reprinted in *The Photographic News*); he noted: "The commercial value of the human face was never tested to such an extent as it is at the present moment in these handy photographs. No man, or woman either, knows but that some accident may elevate them to the position of the hero of the hour, and send up the value of their countenances to a degree they never dreamed of." There were, of course, benefits for the photographer as well as the subject; Wynter continues: "Thus a new source of income has been opened to first-rate photographers, besides the profit arising from taking portraits. A wholesale trade has sprung up with amazing rapidity, and to obtain

a good sitter, and permission to sell his *carte de visite*, is in itself an annuity to a man" (135). Wynter reveals that a photographer could expect to receive £400 for a wholesaler's order of 10,000 cartes; such profits were guaranteed for images of public figures, which were termed "sure cards" in the photographic trade. He confirms that writers like Dickens, Thackeray, and Trollope have a "constant sale," and are "bought for every album" (Wynter 136).

Mason seems to have been at the right place at the right time to capture and market images of Dickens. Their first encounter coincided with the peak of the *carte* trade, and so high volumes of sales were guaranteed; yet by the mid-1860s there was a crisis of overproduction, probably as a result of an increase in the number of studios opening to turn a quick profit from these conveniently sized and priced photographs (Edwards 121–22). This alteration of fortune may have been a factor in Mason's second bankruptcy in 1866–67. By then the world was getting to know—and indeed to own—different kinds of Dickens, in the forms of *cartes de visite*, the larger format cabinet photographs, engravings based on these images, and colorized images put on public display.

The sixteen individual poses under consideration in this study provide fascinating insight into Dickens and his circle; the information gleaned from these images may be contextualized to accord with what else is known about the subjects. Dickens himself, of course, stands out as the key figure, and the prints produced by Mason add significantly to what we know about Dickens the man in a variety of projected roles. Photographs of Dickens are by no means simple: they need to be dissected, decoded, and contextualized, in order to appreciate the occasions on which they were taken, the meanings with which both photographer and subject wished to endow the image, and the impressions made on the viewer. Roland Barthes, in his *Camera Lucida*—a deeply absorbing study of modes of observation—complicates this matter further. He muses on four "image-repertoires" which are at work in the photographic portrait; positioning himself in the role of the subject, he writes: "In front of the lens, I am at the same time: the one I think I am, the one I want others to think I am, the one the photographer thinks I am, and the one he makes use of to exhibit his art." These identities may be very different from one another, and they raise questions for how we hold Dickens in our heads. The variety of poses examined offer us different Dickensian "selves." Barthes explains that the image, when captured, can never be equated with "myself":

I lend myself to the social game, I pose, I know I am posing, I want you to know that I am posing, but (to square the circle) this additional message must in no way alter the precious essence of my individuality: what I am, apart from an effigy. What I want, in short, is that my (mobile) image, buffeted among a thousand shifting photographs, altering with situation and age, should always coincide with my (profound) 'self'; but it is the contrary that must be said: 'myself' never coincides with my image, for it is the image which is heavy, motionless, stubborn (which is why society sustains it),

and ‘myself’ which is light, divided, dispersed; like a bottle-imp, ‘myself’ doesn’t hold still.

(12–13)

Dickens may have cancelled various prints in an effort to fix his image for posterity, and thus develop a more satisfactory sense of self—as he attempted to effect by burning “the accumulated letters and papers of twenty years” on 3 September 1860 (*Letters* 9: 304). In the Mason photographs he wished to appear less like a “griffin” (*Letters* 11: 278), and perhaps more like a father, convivial friend, expert horseman, smart dresser, professional writer, and country gentleman.

The task of looking behind the camera, and discovering reliable information about Robert Hindry Mason, has been far more difficult. His personality has been pieced together from newspaper advertisements, exhibition reviews in the periodical press, law reports, criminal records, bankruptcy records, post office directories, fleeting references in the specialist photographic press, comments written on the back of individual prints, and brief references in Dickensian correspondence. There are no letters from Mason extant (either to Dickens or to anyone else), and no images of him. He remains a shadowy presence who engaged seriously, professionally, and artistically with Dickens to produce the poses and expressions that have become fixed in our mind’s eye, and have shaped our understanding of the great author. Their encounters were relatively brief and infrequent, but vital. Goodyear, in his assessment of Richard Avedon, considers the relationship between photographer and subject:

A portrait is a product of a dynamic exchange—sometimes cooperative, sometimes contested—between no less than two individuals. . . . This interaction—which unfolds not only during the session itself, but also before and after—can be fraught with a variety of different tensions. This is especially the case when the photographic subject is someone whose face is in the public’s consciousness.

(Goodyear 233)

The considerations are similar for both Victorian and modern photographers. In the cases of both Avedon and Mason, the photographers are aware that their images have the capacity to shape public opinion. The photographer brings to the session a series of decisions concerning location, background, props, lighting, positioning, and even topics of conversation. The subject brings one or more ideas about character, personality, intent, and occasion. Through their interaction it is possible for the subject to convey to the camera—and to the viewing audience—something interesting about the self. In the case of Dickens, through the lens of Mason, what emerges is a man who was, at different times, paternal, hospitable, prosperous, gentlemanly, literate, confident, personable, impressive, and, above all, unforgettable.



Fig. 1: R. H. Mason, Dickens on the front porch of Gad's Hill, accompanied (L and R standing) by daughters Katey and Mamie, and (L to R seated) Henry Chorley, Charles Collins, and Georgina Hogarth. By kind permission of the Charles Dickens Museum.



Fig. 2: R. H. Mason, Dickens posed astride a garden chair, reading to Katey (standing) and Mamie (seated) By kind permission of the Charles Dickens Museum.



Fig. 3: R. H. Mason, Dickens sitting on a garden seat, at the rear of Gad's Hill, reading a volume of Thomas Carlyle's *French Revolution*. Carlyle's notes on the back of his copy of the image confirms that the photograph was taken on 6 August 1866.

By kind permission of the Charles Dickens Museum.



Fig. 4: R. H. Mason, Dickens in a double-seated basket phaeton, with Mamie (front seat) Katey, and Georgina Hogarth (L & R, back seat).

The horse, Newman Nogs, is held by the groom James Marsh

By kind permission of the Charles Dickens Museum.



Fig. 5: R. H. Mason, the servants at Gad's Hill. The groom, James Marsh, stands in the back row; others not positively identified.

By kind permission of the Charles Dickens Museum.



Fig. 6: R. H. Mason, Dickens with his bloodhound Turk.

By kind permission of the Charles Dickens Museum.



Fig. 7: R. H. Mason, Dickens in light-coloured suit and bowler hat.
By kind permission of the Charles Dickens Museum.



Fig 8: R. H. Mason, Dickens seated, with book in hand.
By kind permission of the Charles Dickens Museum.



Fig. 9: R. H. Mason, Dickens standing with arms folded, in front of his whatnot desk, with his chair from his study.

By kind permission of the Charles Dickens Museum

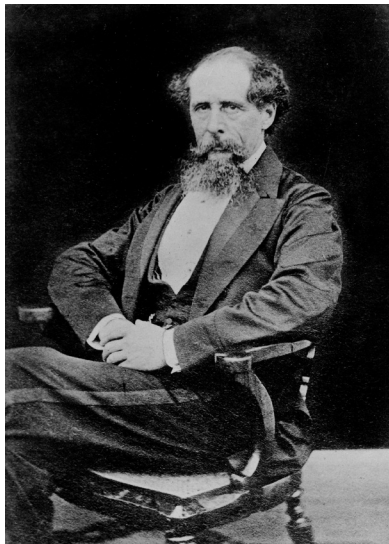


Fig. 10: R. H. Mason, Dickens seated in the chair from his study.

By kind permission of the Charles Dickens Museum.

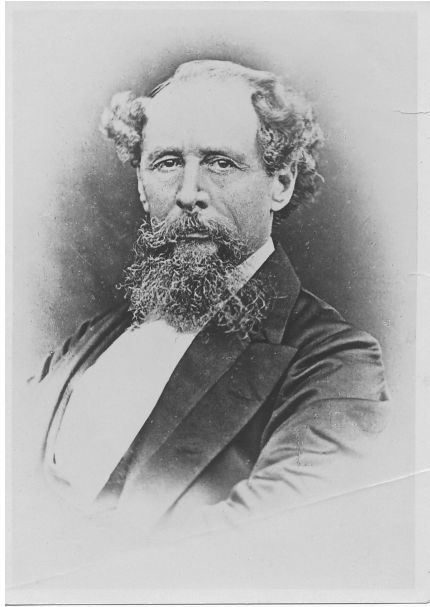


Fig. 11: R. H. Mason, Dickens in evening wear.
The edges of the images are softened by use of an oval matte cut-out.
By kind permission of the Charles Dickens Museum.

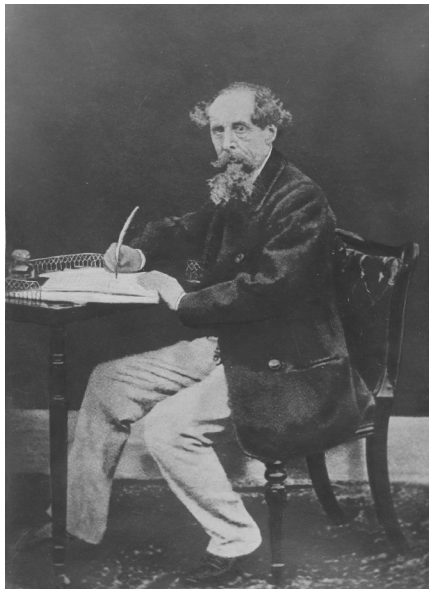


Fig. 12: R. H. Mason, Dickens posed as if writing with a quill
at his whatnot desk.
By kind permission of the Charles Dickens Museum.



Fig. 13: R. H. Mason, Dickens seated at his whatnot desk.
By Kind permission of the Charles Dickens Museum.



Fig. 14: R. H. Mason, Dickens in Mason's studio, posing in front of chair and desk, with
two different supporting legs (studio props).
By kind permission of the Charles Dickens Museum.

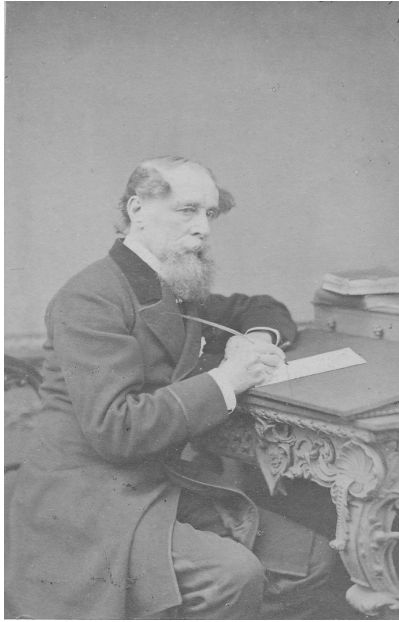


Fig. 15: R. H. Mason, Dickens in Mason's studio, posing with quill in hand.
By kind permission of the Charles Dickens Museum.

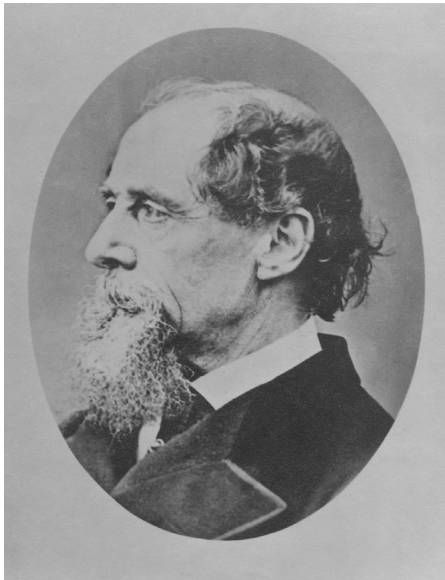


Fig. 16: R. H. Mason, oval cut-out photograph of Dickens, used as the basis of
John H. Baker's engraving for the sixth (posthumous) monthly part of
The Mystery of Edwin Drood.
By kind permission of the Charles Dickens Museum.

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